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ABSTRACT

Exclusion of the press from the first days of the American invasion of Grenada dramatically brought into focus the fundamental conflict between the military's need for secrecy and the press's need to publish information. From the viewpoint of the press, the decision to exclude reporters from the island until the third day of the invasion denied the American people an independent source of information concerning U.S. activities and policies in Grenada. From the military perspective, the decision not to inform reporters of the invasion insured secrecy and thus the safety of troops sent to evacuate 1,000 American citizens. The response by the military to the media's reaction to their exclusion was the formation of a panel, headed by Major General Winant Sidle, to look at how future military operations would be covered. The panel's report contained recommendations they believed would permit press coverage of future military operations without jeopardizing either security or safety; this report thus contained an implicit criticism of the military's handling of the press during the invasion. The invasion of Grenada was a low point in relations between the U.S. military and the American media, and although the news organizations declined to participate on the panel, General Sidle's able handling of the proceedings placated the press to some extent. The benefit from this experience was the panel's success in bringing together representatives of the military and the news media for a step towards improved understanding by all parties. (Sixty-five notes are included.) (MS)

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THE MILITARY AND THE MEDIA IN CONFLICT:
THE SIDLE PANEL AND THE U . S. INVASION OF GRENADA

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Prologue

Exclusion of the press from the first days of the American invasion of Grenada dramatically brought into focus the fundamental conflict between the military's need for secrecy and the press's need to publish.¹ To the press, the decision to exclude reporters from the island until the third day of the invasion denied the American people an independent source of information concerning U. S. activities and policies in Grenada.² To the military, the decision not to inform reporters of the invasion insured secrecy and thus the safety of troops sent to protect and evacuate one thousand American citizens.³

This paper will examine the attempt by the military and the media to reconcile these competing interests in the aftermath of the Grenada mission.

A Preposterous Question

At 4:30 p. m., Monday, October 24, 1983, CBS News correspondent Bill Plante knew that the press spotlight in

¹ Michael P. McDonald, General Counsel for the American Legal Foundation observed that this conflict is inevitable because "successful warfare is based upon secrecy; successful journalism is based on publicity." Statement of the American Legal Foundation, submitted to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Military-Media Relations Panel (Sidle Panel), 24 January 1984, 28, photocopy in possession of author.

² "Censoring the Invasion," Washington Post, 28 October 1983, sec. A, p. 18; "Grenada Censored," Baltimore Sun, 30 October 1983, p. 16.

³ Department of Defense, "Press Conference of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey," transcript, 26 October 1983.

Washington was not on his beat at the White House. That day the press's collective attention was riveted on the Pentagon where reports were updated every hour on the number of dead Marines still being pulled from the twisted rubble that was once their headquarters in Beirut. Correspondents for every major news organization were working feverishly to update their stories with the latest casualty figures reported from the Defense Department's crowded news room.

Across the Potomac River from the Pentagon in the cramped quarters of his White House press "cubicle," Plante received a telephone call from a long-time acquaintance. The information Plante's source provided was even more incredible than the news from Lebanon -- U. S. armed forces would invade the Caribbean island of Grenada the next morning. Plante scoffed at the idea.⁴ He knew that the Pentagon had acknowledged diverting a navy task force off Grenada as a "precaution."⁵ However, Larry Speakes, the White House's press spokesman, had publicly denied that Americans in Grenada were in any kind of danger. To Plante the possibility that Americans would soon be lifted out of Grenada and whisked from the turmoil surrounding takeover of that country's government by a military junta was not far-fetched. An

⁴ Bill Plante letter to Peter Braestrup, 30 March 1985. Plante's letter is reprinted in Twentieth Century Fund, Battle Lines (New York: Priority Press, 1985) p. 89.

⁵ Fred Hiatt, "U. S. Flotilla Remains Near Grenada after Lebanon Bombings," Washington Post, 25 October 1987, p. A-4.

invasion was. Still, Plante's source insisted that the U.S. Army and Marines were about to invade.

There was time to make the evening newscast with the story, but Plante had to have White House confirmation -- some assurance beyond a telephone call from an unnamed source before he could report to the world that the United States was about to invade another country. He went to see Speakes. Was there going to be an invasion of Grenada tomorrow? Speakes laughed. But the question Plante asked was serious and he wanted Speakes to check it out.

Speakes returned to his office to make the necessary phone calls to check out Plante's question. He called Bob Sims at the National Security Council (NSC). No stranger to military operations, Sims, a U. S. Navy captain, was a career military public affairs officer assigned as the NSC's spokesman. A few minutes later after checking with Rear Admiral John Poindexter, the deputy national security adviser, Sims called Speakes with the answer. Poindexter had assured Sims that no invasion was planned. Speakes was not simply to deny the rumor that an invasion was imminent, he was to "knock it down hard" -- to kill the story if he could. "Plante -- no invasion. Preposterous," Speakes assured him.⁴

It was almost 5:30 p.m., still enough time to make the evening news with a breaking story if Plante could find hard evidence that would confirm his tip. But even after a few

⁴ Plante, *ibid.*

additional phone calls he had nothing that would dispute Speakes' unequivocal denial. Bill Plante had no story.

At 6 p.m. President Reagan signed a directive ordering U. S. troops to invade the West Indies nation of Grenada.⁷ Operation "Urgent Fury" was put in motion.

The Invasion--Leaving the Press Behind

On Tuesday, October 25, 1983, D-Day (Deployment Day) for Operation "Urgent Fury," U. S. troops poised for the invasion of Grenada. Marines from the Navy assault ship Guam were boarding helicopters for the initial assault on Pearls Airport on the northern part of the Grenadan isle. Army Ranger units were flying directly from the U. S. on board Air Force C-130 troop transports headed for Port Salines airstrip, a runway complex still under construction by a small army of Cuban "workers."⁸ The planes were packed with Rangers, about fifty per plane, and all the equipment they would need to seize and clear the runway on the southwestern tip of the island --Jeeps crammed with radios, machine guns, recoilless rifles and ammunition.⁹ Just over the horizon to the east an eleven-ship Navy task force,

⁷ Department of State, Press Release No. 377, "Transcript of Secretary of State George Shultz press conference," 25 October 1983. Reprinted in Department of State Bulletin, December 1983, pp. 69-72.

⁸ B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "Grenada Invasion: A Series of Surprises," New York Times, 14 November 1983, p. 1.

⁹ Rod Hafemeister, "Grenada: The Insertion," Soldier of Fortune, February 1984, pp. 60-61.

including the aircraft carrier USS Independence, was ready to provide air cover and additional firepower for the U. S. and allied troops once they reached shore.¹⁰

At 5 a. m., in pre-dawn darkness, the invasion was launched. News was being made on the shores and in the skies over Grenada. The United States was committing troops to combat against a foreign nation for the first time since Vietnam. American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines would be injured; some would die. But unlike Normandy, unlike Inchon, and unlike Vietnam, there would be no first-hand reports of the battles on Grenada from American "war correspondents." The United States was about to fight its first "off-the-record" war because the press had been left behind.¹¹

¹⁰ The initial assault force was composed of 400 Marines from the 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) at Pearl's Airport; 300 Rangers from the 1st Battalion and 250 from the 2nd Ranger Battalion at the Port Salines airstrip. The initial invasion force included a total of 1,800 Marines from the 22nd MAU, several dozen Navy Seal commandos, 700 Army Rangers, and 1,600 Army paratroopers. Ayres, New York Times, 14 November 1983. Included with these U.S. forces were a contingent of 300 fighters representing the nations of Antigua, Guadeloupe, Dominica, St. Lucia, Martinique, St. Vincent and Barbados, all members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States. Dennis Mullin, "Why the Surprise Move in Grenada--And What Next?", U.S. News and World Report, 7 November 1983, p. 32.

¹¹ Journalists and headline writers dubbed the American invasion of Grenada an "off-the-record" war because the press was not permitted access to the island for more than two days after the first troops landed. Only after the fighting had subsided and all of the major military objectives achieved did the military permit reporters on to the island. Jonathan Friendly, "Press Voices Criticism of 'Off-the-Record War'," New York Times 4 November 1983, p. 16.

The Uproar From the Press

Leaving the press behind was no accident. Neither was keeping Larry Speakes, the President's own press spokesman, in the dark about the invasion plans. At the White House, Chief of Staff James Baker had excluded Speakes and David Gergen, Reagan's communication director, from the meetings and planning sessions for the invasion. Maintaining secrecy about "Urgent Fury" meant keeping the details of that impending invasion from many people who should have known -- including official government spokesmen. The element of surprise was critical and American lives could be lost if the invasion was inadvertently confirmed in advance, Baker recounted in an interview.¹² Baker's decision was imitated throughout Washington. Mike Burch, the Defense Department's top spokesman, was not told that an invasion was being planned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff just down the hall from his suite of offices in the Pentagon. Even John Hughes, Secretary of State George Shultz's senior spokesman, did not know.¹³

Speakes, Gergen, Hughes, Burch and other official government spokesmen were not told of the invasion to insure that reporters

¹² Lou Cannon, "Reagan Press Aide Resigns," Washington Post, 1 November 1983, p. A-1.

¹³ According to Braestrup, Burch and Hughes were told of the invasion Monday night, October 24, after the President had signed the invasion directive and U.S. forces were already on the way. Speakes did not know about it until after it began. See Battle Lines, Chapter 6, "Grenada," pp. 88-90.

like Bill Plante would not have the story in advance.¹⁴ The strategy worked, but not without costs.

The media's reaction to their exclusion from direct coverage of American troops in combat was quickly branded as "unprecedented."¹⁵ News organizations, individually and collectively through their associations, fired off protests to President Reagan, Secretary of Defense Weinberger, and members of Congress.¹⁶ Statements by the Pentagon, White House and State Department officials were treated with suspicion.¹⁷ As

¹⁴ Modern history is rich with examples of government spokesmen being excluded from key decisions to prevent "leaks" or saving them from the ethical choice between lying to reporters or telling the truth. President Kennedy did not inform his press spokesman, Pierre Salinger, of the planned invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Lois Romano, "The Truth and How To Avoid It," Washington Post, 28 October 1983, p. B-3. In contrast, President Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, participated in White House strategy and planning sessions for the attempted rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran in 1980. Jody Powell, The Other Side of the Story (New York: William Morrow, 1984) pp. 223-240. According to Stephen Hess, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute and an expert on press-government relations, keeping sensitive information from government spokesmen stems from a fear that the spokesmen will tell the media. In his authoritative study of the press and government press officers, Hess found no basis for this fear. Stephen Hess, The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and their Offices, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1984).

¹⁵ John Chancellor commentary, NBC Nightly News, November 1, 1983; Phil Gailey, "Administration Puts Tough Restrictions on News of Grenada," New York Times, 27 October 1983, p. 1.

¹⁶ Gailey, ibid.; "Editors Protest to Pentagon," New York Times, 1 November 1983, p. 16.

¹⁷ "Censoring Confidence," Los Angeles Times, 30 October 1983, p. 24-A; "Grenada Censored," Baltimore Sun, 30 October 1983, p. 16-A; "An Off-the-Record War," Newsweek, 7 November 1983, p. 86; Stuart Taylor Jr., "In Wake of Invasion, Much Official Misinformation by U. S. Comes to Light," New York Times, 6 November 1983, p. 20.

fighting in Grenada wore on, pressure by the media mounted for access to the combat zone. Unable to get to Grenada reporters, photographers, television and radio crews and freelance writers -- by one estimate, as many as four hundred to seven hundred people¹⁸ -- assembled on the nearby island of Barbados. "There were more press people -- or at least people claiming to represent the press -- on Barbados than there were armed Cubans on Grenada," one Pentagon spokesman remarked.¹⁹

Private planes and boats were hired by many of the reporters seeking transportation to Grenada by air or sea. The major American television networks chartered a Bahamian C-130 transport plane at a cost of \$48,000 per day to fly television crews, equipment and a satellite earth station to Grenada to broadcast the fighting there.²⁰ They were turned back to Barbados by the Navy Task Force off shore. The military had not anticipated the flood of press interest in this operation.²¹

The military also had not anticipated that the mission would

¹⁸ Michael I. Burch, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, interview by author, 18 November 1983, Arlington, Va., tape recording. Other reports place the number of reporters on Barbados at that time at closer to one thousand. See John D. Lunt, Grenada: A Media Assessment, Air War College Research Report No. AU-AWC-84-136, May 1984, p. 27.

¹⁹ Robert J. O'Brien, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, interview with author, 18 November 1983, Arlington, Va., tape recording.

²⁰ Burch interview.

²¹ Ibid.

take longer than one day, but it did.²² As the fighting ground on to a second day, and a third, then a fourth, the press questioned the truthfulness of government accounts of the fighting and the rationale that was espoused for the invasion. When reporters were finally permitted on Grenada, the third and fourth days of fighting, they filed accounts of previously unacknowledged civilian casualties in the accidental bombing by Navy fighter aircraft of a mental hospital.²³ Government credibility suffered.

To some in the Pentagon, an example of successful use of American military force as an instrument of U. S. foreign policy was being overshadowed by media preoccupation with exclusion of the press. Commented one senior Pentagon official, "There were probably more stories, more words, more ink on the exclusion of the press than there were on the military victory in Grenada."²⁴

The perception that exclusion of the press was coloring the news coverage of Grenada was not lost on General John W. (Jack) Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The nation's senior uniformed officer, Vessey was widely credited and blamed

²² According to Major General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of Army forces in Grenada, "Initially we thought it would be a one-day operation with no resistance." Quoted in Bill Kling, "Advance Warning Hindered U. S. Operations in Grenada," Washington Times, 9 November 1983, p. 1.

²³ "Pentagon Account of Attack," New York Times, 1 November 1983, p. 16. See also Taylor, New York Times, *ibid.*

²⁴ Burch interview, *ibid.*

for the decision to exclude the press from Grenada.²⁵ Although the final decision was made by the President,²⁶ Reagan conceded to the exclusion policy advanced by his trusted and respected military adviser, General Jack Vessey, himself a combat-proven veteran of three wars.²⁷ But now even Vessey was having second thoughts.²⁸

The Surprise Announcement

On Sunday, November 6, General Vessey was the featured guest of NBC television's question-and-answer program, "Meet the Press." Even though the fighting had stopped and the press was now free to roam the island, Vessey knew that Grenada was still filling the pages of newspapers and magazines, and crowding the airwaves of radio and television talk shows like this one. It

²⁵ Saul Friedman, "White House Let Pentagon Cut Off News of Invasion," Philadelphia Inquirer, 28 October 1983, p. 14; Jack Foisie, "Press-Military Relations," Nieman Reports, 38 (Spring 1984) : 15-16.

²⁶ Colonel H. E. (Ed) Robertson, former special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John W. Vessey Jr., telephone interview with author, Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, 13 October 1987, Durham, N.C.

²⁷ Although President Reagan, as Commander-in-Chief, was responsible for the decision to exclude the press from Grenada it has been generally acknowledged that the President acquiesced to General Vessey's insistence that the press not accompany U. S. troops in the invasion. While no primary source has been found to verify this version of the decision-making, an excellent second-hand account can be found in Foisie, *ibid.* Foisie's account is based on the recollections of a National Security Council staff member who attended the meeting where the decision was made to exclude the press.

²⁸ Robertson interview.

was certain to be a major focus of questioning by this panel of journalist-inquisitors who would surely probe the sensitive question of excluding the press in the early days of the invasion.²⁹ Vessey did not have to wait long for the question.

"Do you have any retrospective thoughts about the extent to which reporters were excluded from that operation (Grenada) in the first couple of days?" Bill Monroe, NBC's senior panelist queried.³⁰ Vessey offered up his, by now, oft-quoted explanation that the need for surprise and the desire to minimize civilian and military casualties had dictated the need to exclude the press. Not until the students were located, protected and evacuated could the press be allowed access to the combat zones, he explained.

But unlike his earlier statements on the subject, Vessey did not end with that explanation. "There is obviously a lot more to say on military operations and the press," he continued. "I think we need to work together to find ways to . . . inform the public, but without endangering the military operation or our own people," he added.³¹ The syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft picked up on Vessey's hint of accommodation. "You said there was a lot more to say about relations between the military and the press?" he asked. "Is there anything you are contemplating, any

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ General John W. Vessey, "Meet the Press," 6 November 1983, transcript, pp. 1-2.

³¹ Ibid., p. 2.

steps?" "Yes," Vessey replied. "I have asked retired General 'Si' Sidle . . . to head up a panel for me of experienced newsmen to help us decide how in this modern age of the television camera, instantaneous communications around the world, we can conduct military operations and protect the operation, protect our own people and still inform the American people -- how to do it."³² NBC's panel went on to other subjects, leaving the significance of Vessey's remark about his own panel for others to explore.

The announcement that General Vessey was forming a panel to look at how future military operations would be covered took many people by surprise. He had not discussed his intentions with anyone during the extensive preparations and practice for his appearance on "Meet the Press."³³ His special assistant who had worked closely with him in preparing for the program was surprised.³⁴ Michael Burch, watching the program from his home in suburban Virginia, was equally surprised.³⁵ So was Burch's boss, Caspar Weinberger.³⁶ Vessey had not talked to Weinberger or any other senior official about his decision to form a panel. He had not even informed the head of that panel, retired Army Major General Winant "Si" Sidle who had been mowing his lawn in

³² Ibid., p. 3.

³³ Robertson interview.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Burch interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

Orlando, Florida, during "Meet the Press."³⁷ Not until a reporter with the New York Times called him did Sidle realize he had been named to head this panel. Shortly after his conversation with the Times, Sidle received another phone call -- from General Vessey asking him to serve as chairman of the panel.³⁸

Sidle was "a natural" to head up a panel to look at how the press could be accommodated in future military operations like Grenada.³⁹ The senior military information officer in Vietnam in 1968, he later served as the Pentagon's senior uniformed spokesman when he was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in 1974. As a field artillery officer, he had extensive combat experience as well.⁴⁰ After retiring from the military in 1975, he became the director of public relations for Martin Marietta Aerospace in Orlando, Florida, a major defense contractor. His close friendship with General Vessey, members of the news media and military public affairs officers made him the perfect choice for the job.⁴¹

³⁷ Robertson interview.

³⁸ Burch interview.

³⁹ O'Brien interview.

⁴⁰ Department of the Army, "Official Biography of Major General Winant Sidle (Retired)," Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

⁴¹ O'Brien interview.

Setting Up The Sidle Panel

Sidle wasted no time in setting to work on his task. Granted a virtually unlimited leave of absence by Martin Marietta, he flew to Washington where he took over a small office near Burch's in the Pentagon. He spent most of December and January assembling his new panel and determining who he would ask to make presentations to the group.⁴² In keeping with General Vessey's announcement on television, Sidle sent letters to major news organizations and press associations asking for comments and for members to serve on the panel. The letters, signed by General Vessey, were mailed December 8, 1983.⁴³ Reaction was swift.

The working press, news organizations and their umbrella press organizations welcomed the concept of a panel to examine the military-media relationship in future. However, in a unified, concerted action, all refused to participate as members of the panel. In a pointed, yet typical, response to General Vessey's letter, William Small, president of United Press International wire service, wrote:

⁴² Burch interview.

⁴³ The letters were mailed to Edward O. Fritts, National Association of Broadcasters; Henry A. Grunwald, editor-in-chief, Time; Marvin Stone, editor, U. S. News & World Report; Gene Giancarlo, executive director, American Society of Newspaper Editors; Jerry W. Friedheim, executive vice president, American Newspaper Publishers Association; William J. Small, president, United Press International; Don Byrne, president, National Press Club; Keith Fuller, president and general manager, Associated Press; and William Broyles Jr., editor-in-chief, Newsweek.

My sense of outrage over what you have done in excluding the press during the first days of Grenada was -- and remains -- so vivid that I am surprised that I am able to maintain a restrained and civil tongue in replying to your letter My recommendation to my UPI colleagues is that we consider joining the Pentagon panel only if we have . . . your firm assurance that we will never again be excluded when American troops face hostile situations.⁴⁴

Unknown to either Sidle or Vessey, the decision not to participate in the Pentagon's panel had already been made by the nation's major national press associations at a meeting on November 30 in Washington. The group, after determining that a lawsuit against the government challenging the military's right to exclude the press from Grenada was likely to fail, elected instead to negotiate for access. News organizations would, however, provide witnesses if requested by Generals Vessey or Sidle.⁴⁵

Frustrated in his attempt to get news organizations to nominate members to his panel, Sidle turned to retired war correspondents, academicians and former news executives to represent the press's viewpoint.⁴⁶ To represent the military's

⁴⁴ William J. Small letter to General John W. Vessey, December 16, 1983.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Friendly, "Press Groups Ask Talks on Combat Coverage," New York Times, 2 December 1983, p. A11.

⁴⁶ This group included Keyes Beech, retired war correspondent for the Chicago Daily News, and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for war reporting; Wendel S. (Bud) Merick, retired war correspondent for U. S. News & World Report; A. J. Langguth, professor of journalism, University of California, and a former Associated Press bureau chief in Saigon; Barry Zorthian, a former foreign service officer and chief spokesman for the U. S.

viewpoint on the panel, public affairs officers from the four services, one person from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and two officers from the Joint Chiefs of Staff with operations and planning backgrounds were chosen.⁴⁷

On January 31, 1984, the group was officially chartered and authorized by the Department of Defense as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/Media Relations Committee (Sidle Panel).⁴⁸ The panel was not asked by General Vessey to assess the handling of news media in Grenada. Instead, he charged the panel with recommending how to "conduct (future) military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of our military, protects the security of the operation while keeping the American public informed."⁴⁹ To consider this and the myriad of other issues

Mission, Saigon; Richard S. Salant, president and chief executive officer, National News Council, and former head of CBS news; and Dr. Scott Cutlip, dean of the School of Journalism, University of Georgia.

⁴⁷ These military members of the panel were Colonel George Kirschenbauer, U. S. Army, and Captain James Major, U. S. Navy, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (J-3); Robert J. O'Brien, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs); Billy Hunt, Department of the Army, Office of Public Affairs; Captain Brent Baker, Department of the Navy, Office of Public Affairs; Tom Halbert, Department of the Air Force, Office of Public Affairs; Major Fred Lash, U. S. Marine Corps, Office of Public Affairs. The panel was chaired by Major General Sidle, U. S. Army, retired.

⁴⁸ General John W. Vessey Jr., Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Administration), Pentagon, Washington, D. C., CM-577-84, 31 January 1984, Photocopy in possession of author.

⁴⁹ Major General Winant Sidle to General John W. Vessey, Washington, D. C., 17 November 1983, Photocopy in possession of author.

left unsettled in the aftermath of Operation Urgent Fury, the Sidle Panel convened the following month at the National Defense University, Fort McNair, D. C., for five days of public presentations and discussions.

Sidle Panel Deliberations

By February tempers had cooled -- in part due to the passage of time and in part due to public polls indicating a majority of Americans did not sympathize with the press in their battle over access to Grenada.³⁰ By the time the Sidle Panel met as a group, February 6, the stage was set for calm deliberations. In the months preceeding the panel's public meetings, Sidle had already written to an extensive list of potential presenters including journalism associations, professional groups, and national media organizations as well as the individual military services. Sidle asked everyone he contacted to provide written answers to a battery of questions that would be considered by the panel. Their answers provided a framework for inquiry and a record of the various organizations' official positions on most of the contentious issues faced by the panel. While many of the questions Sidle asked involved logistical and physical requirements of the press in covering military operations, other issues were covered as well. The list of nine broad questions included issues of:

³⁰ O'Brien interview.

- (1) the media's right of access to military operations under the First Amendment
- (2) the number of people and skills required for coverage of military operations
- (3) press pools³¹
- (4) types and kinds of military operations to be covered
- (5) communications requirements
- (6) accreditation of reporters
- (7) access to foreign countries by U. S. news media
- (8) access of foreign news media to U. S. military operations
- (9) military censorship

Individual presenters could provide verbal elaboration of their written positions on each of these issues during the panel's questioning. The list of presenters prepared by Sidle represented all different kinds of news organizations, agencies and individuals likely to cover military operations in the future. The unique needs of broadcast media, magazines, still photographers as well as reporters for wire services and traditional print media would be brought out in detailed questioning by the panel's members. This advance work by Sidle

³¹ A "news pool" is formed whenever a large number of media representatives are on the scene and they cannot all be accommodated at once because of operational, transportation, space or other limitations. A selection of media representatives is chosen to cover activities on behalf of all other news outlets. When the pool members return from the scene, they are obliged by professional ethics to share their information with reporters who stayed behind before reporting to their own news organization. Public Affairs Handbook, 6th ed. (Defense Information School, Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, 1985), Chapter 6, p. 14.

served to refocus the upcoming discussions away from a potentially pugnacious post mortem of Grenada concentrating, instead, on the more abstract issue of coverage of "future" military operations.

The panel contributed substantially to the calm, deliberative atmosphere that characterized its public meetings when it agreed to two premises in its closed conference prior to public sessions February 6. First, the panel would not consider the question of whether there is a First Amendment right of access by the media to military operations. That question was a "matter for the legal profession" General Sidle told the audience observing the hearings that day. "The panel does not feel qualified to solve it."³² Second, General Sidle announced that the panel unanimously agreed that "the U. S. media should cover U. S. military operations to the maximum degree possible consistent with missions, security, and the safety of U. S. forces."³³ The two most contentious issues facing the Sidle Panel had been defused. No longer was the debate to center

³² Unpublished transcript of proceedings of the CJCS/Media Relations Study Panel, 6 February 1984, Photocopy in possession of author, 3. Although the major news organizations had elected not to litigate on the basis of a First Amendment right of access to military operations, Larry Flynt, publisher of Hustler magazine, had filed suit against Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia on November 21, 1983. Flynt's suit alleged that the government had hindered his efforts to send reporters to Grenada for the purpose of gathering news. Flynt v. Weinberger, Civil Action, No. 83-3191 (D.D.C.). The lawsuit was later dismissed as moot by the District Court, Media Law Reporter, 10 (1984): 1978-1981.

³³ Sidle Transcript.

around if the media should cover military operations, as it had in the weeks following Grenada. Instead, discussions would now concentrate on questions of how the press could cover military missions in the future. The press had achieved a major accommodation from the government when the Sidle Panel affirmed the media's need for access and the public's right to independent information about military operations.⁵⁴

Having cleared this major hurdle the panel, and an array of presenters from the military services and news organizations, spent the next three days generally agreeing with one another on the principles of access, differing simply on the details of making access work. Only the issue of mandatory censorship by the military during combat rekindled the fiery condemnation of journalists that had characterized the Grenada experience.

After hearing presentations from twenty-five senior media representatives speaking on behalf of nineteen news organizations and associations, the panel concluded its open hearings on February 9.⁵⁵ That same day panel members moved to smaller

⁵⁴ On January 10, 1984, a special committee of senior representatives of the ten major national news organizations adopted "A Statement of Principle on Press Access to Military Operations." The statement called for reaffirmation by the government of the principle that journalists should be present at U. S. military operations. See "Media Organizations Take A Stand," Editor & Publisher, 14 January 1984, p. 18. See also, "Opening Comments of Jerry W. Friedheim, Executive Vice President, American Newspaper Publisher's Association before the Panel on Military-Media Relations," ANPA New Release No. 3-2/6/84, 6 February 1984, p. 2.

⁵⁵ In addition to the formal presentations the panel had 24 written inputs to consider for their final report. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Report by the CJCS Media-

quarters in a conference room of the nearby War College on Fort McNair, an imposing domed building overlooking the Potomac. But the war between the military and the media was over, at least for now. It was time to work out the details of an armistice. Over the next one and one-half days of closed sessions the details of that armistice, in the form of formal recommendations of the panel, were debated. Later, in solitude, General Sidle pieced together a final report of his committee for approval and signature by each panel member.

The Panel Makes Its Recommendations

This report, the Sidle Report, contained recommendations the panel believed would permit press coverage of future military operations without jeopardizing either security or safety. The eight recommendations offered by the panel to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to achieve this objective included:

- (1) Public affairs planning for military operations should be conducted concurrently with the planning of the operation
- (2) A national media pool system that could be used on short notice to cover military operations should be formed
- (3) An accrediting and notification system for reporters should be established
- (4) Access to military operations by media should be governed by voluntary adherence to security guidelines or ground rules established by the military and agreed to in advance by the press

Military Relations Panel (Sidle Panel), Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 30 April 1984, pp. 1-2.

- (5) Sufficient numbers of military public affairs personnel and equipment should be made available to assist correspondents covering military operations
- (6) Media communications requirements should be considered in planning for military operations
- (7) Plans for transportation of media representatives should be made
- (8) A program should be established to increase understanding and awareness of the news media by the military including programs of instruction at all service schools and colleges, visits to news organizations by commanders and regular meetings between the press and the military³⁶

Although General Vessey did not charge the Sidle Panel with examining how the press was handled during Grenada, the panel's recommendations were an implicit criticism of the handling of the press during the invasion. The recommendations stood out in stark contrast to what the military had not done throughout Operation Urgent Fury. "Had our recommendations been 'in place' and fully considered at the time of Grenada," General Sidle observed, "there might have been no need to create our panel."³⁷

The panel's report was presented to General Vessey April 30, 1984.³⁸ After considerable study by his staff, Vessey fully endorsed its conclusions and sent the report to Secretary of

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 4-6.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The report was presented to General Vessey on April 30, 1984, by Robert J. O'Brien, a member of the panel. General Sidle was unable to present the report personally due to scheduling conflicts. Major General Winant Sidle, Orlando, Florida, letter to General John W. Vessey Jr., Washington, D.C., 27 April 1984, photocopy in possession of author.

Defense Weinberger on June 6, 1984.³⁹ At a Pentagon press conference, Secretary Weinberger publicly released the report, announcing that he was accepting all of the Sidle Panel's recommendations for press coverage of future military operations.⁴⁰ The press hailed the Sidle Report as a complete vindication of their protests over exclusion from the Grenada invasion.⁴¹ The Defense Department, however, offered no apologies.⁴²

Conclusions

Excluding the press from Grenada in 1983 was a "low point" in the relationship between the U. S. military and the American

³⁹ Secretary of Defense, letter from General John W. Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Sidle Panel Report" (CM 730-84), 6 June 1984, photocopy in possession of author.

⁴⁰ Department of Defense, News Release "Statement by the Secretary of Defense," No. 450-84, 23 August 1984. "Transcript of Press Conference by Honorable Michael I. Burch, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs," 23 August 1984, photocopy in possession of author.

⁴¹ Editorial, "Press vindicated on Grenada," Editor & Publisher, 8 September 1984, p. 6. "Off-the-record wars: a military retreat," Newsweek, 20 February 1984, p. 54.

⁴² During his press conference releasing the Sidle Report, Michael I. Burch, spokesman for Defense Secretary Weinberger had the following exchange with a reporter: "(Unidentified Questioner) As far as this Administration is concerned, in the building (the Pentagon) there is no apology, no need to look back at Grenada and say we didn't exactly do that the way we're terribly proud of. You're putting that behind you, what's done is done?" "(Burch replies) I think that's the best way to look at it." Press Conference Transcript, 23 August 1984, p. 5.

news media.⁶³ It represents an unfortunate and serious departure from the tradition of independent coverage by the press of major military operations. If there was a benefit from the experience of Grenada it was that both the military and the press were compelled by crisis to sit down together and seek a mutual accommodation of the military's need for secrecy and the media's right to publish. The work of the Sidle Panel represents the bridge between these often contentious, conflicting needs.

The panel's success in bringing together representatives of the military and the news media was, according to Secretary Weinberger, "a necessary first step toward improved understanding by all parties."⁶⁴ Whether further improvements continue to be made depends on both the military and news organizations following the Sidle Panel's blueprint and applying it the next time use of American military force is contemplated. There are encouraging signs that this blueprint is being followed.

The national media pool envisioned by the Sidle Panel for coverage of military operations has been formed and is regularly used by the press and the Defense Department in routine military exercises. The pool was used for the first time to provide coverage of an actual military operation in July 1987 when ten members accompanied the U. S. naval fleet escorting reflagged

⁶³ Burch interview.

⁶⁴ Department of Defense News Release, 23 August 1984.

Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf.⁶³ Today, news coverage of this important military operation continues with reporters on board U. S. ships and helicopters deployed in the Persian Gulf. This time, the press was not left behind.

⁶³ Mark Thompson, "With the Press Pool in the Persian Gulf," Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1987, pp. 40-45. Also, Tim Ahern, "White Smoke in the Persian Gulf: How the Press Pool Worked," Washington Journalism Review, October 1987, pp. 16-18. Both Thompson and Ahern participated in the first use of the national media pool during a military operation in the Persian Gulf. Their first-person accounts provide insight into the problems and benefits of reporting from on-the-scene as part of a pool arrangement. For further discussion of problems with the pool, see George Garneau, "Problems with Pentagon's Persian Gulf Press Pool," Editor & Publisher, 7 November 1987, pp. 9-10.